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Criticism

Volume 57
Issue 4 *The Avant-Garde at War*

Article 2

2015

Introduction

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> *The idea of the avant-garde is embedded in a theory of history.*
>
> —Fred Moten, *In the Break* (2003)[1]

The term *avant-garde* bears explicit militaristic overtones, yet the question of how artistic vanguards bear out the martial strategies implied in the name is a fraught one. Does "avant-garde" refer to a set of cultural maneuvers with distinctly political effects or to experimental aesthetic practices whose political effects remain debatable, even contestable? The answer has, for the past two centuries, tended to be yes and yes, though hardly without equivocation or debate.[2] In spite of the term's express appeal to forwardness and advancement, the movements and imperatives we tend to designate as avant-garde are often saddled with concerns about political consequence. Beyond the question of what an avant-garde *is*, in other words, it remains no less pressing to investigate what an avant-garde *does*: what it might be, or what it will have been. To this end, scholars and historians of radical aesthetic and political groups of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries often invoke past or future moments of historical rupture as the basis for their judgments of exigency: the traumatic aftermath of a recent war, for instance, or the utopian promise of a revolution to come. Whether we look to discrete art movements such as Dada, futurism, constructivism, Malvo, and Fluxus; to broader sociopolitical and aesthetic tendencies such as magical realism and the Black Arts Movement; or to more diffuse forms of political and aesthetic radicalism around the world, the historical coordinates against which scholars and practitioners of experimental art gauge the stakes of this practice seem indefatigably to return to the militaristic inclinations of the term *avant-garde* itself. War—or violent conflict—becomes the

Criticism Fall 2015, Vol. 57, No. 4, pp. 521–531. ISSN 0011-1589. doi: 10.13110/criticism.57.4.0521

historical marker of an avant-garde's historical purpose and limits, the ground against which its experiments can be measured and named as such. How does our understanding of the radical gestures of experimental groups change when the conditions of warfare instead take center stage? How do avant-garde groups function during times of war?

Marking the long centenary of the First World War, this special issue of *Criticism* addresses how modern experimental artistic movements respond to the experience of warfare, whether world wars, revolutions, civil wars, colonial invasions, Cold Wars, Dirty Wars, or anticolonial uprisings. Rather than rehearsing well-known tales about modern art or lamenting the tragic fate of avant-garde groups and artists after the rise of fascism, this issue explores new ways of thinking about the intellectual and artistic consequences of warfare and its concomitant experiences of historical rupture and ideological unrest. Even within the artificial framework of a centennial, the historical period spanning the years between 1914 and 2016 demonstrates the capacity for modern mechanized warfare to exceed its historical limits. The war once known, however ironically, as "Great" now stands as the implicit threshold of modern technological warfare, whereby the military recourse to mustard gas and aerial attacks now finds its technological complement in the drone strike, the large-scale mobilization of refugees, and the virtual perpetuation of warfare itself as a contemporary global condition. What had been eminently fearsome to Cold War nations at midcentury—namely, a war that could launch with the push of the button—is now a relative commonplace. To the extent that the so-called Great War of a century ago disclosed the technological horizon into which we now find ourselves receding, it also marks an epoch, a dividing line in our modernity. While hardly the first instance of multinational warfare, it tends to bracket our understanding of modernity as a global condition that consists not only of industrial capitalism but of industrialized conflict, deterritorialization, and the large-scale mobilization of national resources, as well.

As Timothy Youker proposes in his contribution to this issue, the periodizing logic that cites WWI as the dividing line for either mechanized warfare *or* the radical activity of avant-garde artistic movements is misleading, however. As Youker writes, "Evoking commonplace historical categories of *prewar, avant-guerre, interwar*, and *postwar* can, intentionally or not, amount to an act of semantic sleight of hand that hides the violent conflicts in which the European powers participated before, between, and after the two world wars" (p. 536). The innumerable colonial expansions, invasions, suppressed uprisings, and other so-called pacifications of the modern age reveal a continuity far beyond the period bracketed by two world wars. As Fred Moten has written, such conditions are

continuous with a "particular geographical ideology" articulated in the Hegelian dialectic of European imperialism, "a geographical-racial or racist unconscious" that "marks and is the problematic out of which or against the backdrop of which the idea of the avant-garde emerges." Avant-gardism is the name for a surplus effect of this racist unconscious, the "social, aesthetic, political-economic, and theoretical" surplus of imperialism that can yield ruptural solidarities, but which can just as easily resolve into fetishism and self-congratulatory assessments of "value."[3] Such violence discloses instead an open series of militarized conflicts and interventions whose contemporaneity is rarely far from apparent: the legacies and repercussions of colonialism, imperial invasion, genocide, and the Middle Passage are as pervasive in 2016 as they were in 1680, in 1860, in 1954, or in 1956, albeit with varying degrees of ideological and experiential immediacy.

"The Avant-Garde at War" thus challenges the tendency to historicize aesthetic radicalism as taking place between, before, or after—rather than during—periods of active combat and occupation. The six essays in this special issue focus instead on moments of historical emergency that might otherwise seem to dwarf the concerns of intellectual activism or literary and artistic production. Artistic activity and political radicalism hardly cease during wartime, however, even if the precise nature of such practices varies wildly. Like many of the Italian futurists, for instance, poet Guillaume Apollinaire was seriously wounded on the battlefield—a trauma that heightened rather than diminished the intensity of his ideological commitments. By contrast, the editors of the anarcho-syndicalist *Little Review* increasingly deradicalized the political stance of their journal during WWI, under pressure of US officials. During the Vichy régime in France, in turn, Gertrude Stein addressed the historical forces at work in global warfare by means of a kind of pareleptic abstraction that amounted neither to overt resistance nor, for that matter, to collaborationism. By contrast, Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu* confronts postcolonial politics with the persistent violences and suppressions carried out in the name of an alleged peace. Spanning the wars and uprisings of the past century and a half, while still recognizing the massive geopolitical upheaval of World Wars I and II, this issue examines the changing priorities and conditions of experimental movements and figures during such moments of militarized violence.

In this context, the study of artistic avant-gardes arrives with few overarching definitions about the political instrumentality of radical art or radical thought; it demands instead that we suspend the certainties we might seek in the success or failure of experimental art. The avant-garde at war shifts our focus from the rhetorical combativeness of radical art

toward the historical, political, epistemological, and aesthetic investments of its constituent artistic and political strategies, as well as toward the environments and conditions of their deployment. The ferocity, even virulence, of debates over the successes or failings of experimental art might be measured less according to an immediate causal tie to political action or a definitive break with traditions of artistic or historical continuity than to its mediated emergence in the midst of wartime conditions. The radicalism of poetry, visual art, film, theater, performance, music, and, increasingly, digital interactivity constitutes an imperative, we might say, rather than an inherent property: it points to an ambition—whether implicit or explicit—rather than a definitive result. Rather than viewing the avant-garde as either a reaction to the horrors of warfare (as is often the case in histories of Dada, for instance) or as a motive force for the coming insurrection (as in the case of, say, surrealism, négritude, or situationism), the essays collected here examine the immanent tactics of experimental artistic groups that emerge under conditions of historical emergency. In this respect, avant-gardism no longer denotes a stable category of aesthetic or historical judgment, although attempts to define and theorize the avant-garde in this way have often been broached. Such radicalism offers no guarantees—and indeed, to the extent that such ambitions can and have been explicitly self-applied, they are also subject to interrogation, suspicion, and even dismissal.

The ambitions of radical movements are often difficult to ignore: the political intentions of much experimental art already bristle with intensity within the rhetoric, the group dynamics, and the public manifestos such movements tend to produce. The surrealists, for instance, were as prolific in the dissemination of political tracts and pamphlets as they were in the creation of poetry and painting; contemporary participatory and performance art seeks to demarcate new and often discomfiting forms of collective engagement. At the same time, however, the critical deployment of "avant-garde" as a category of art-historical or political distinction tends to be retrospective: a movement worked or failed; its techniques and artworks constituted an Event, marked a historical rupture, or left a significant historical impression; a group's provocations, though once obscure, have since come to appear revolutionary, provocative, significant, or merely fashionable. However celebratory of radical art's promises and potentialities such retrospective judgments of futurity might appear, they are inevitably bound up in the politics of canon formation and narratives of literary and artistic supersession, as well as in outright nostalgia. The oft-pronounced "death" of the avant-garde likewise has much to do with this kind of hindsight, the product of retro-analytical judgments of

historical significance levied from the critical vantage point of, say, a more complacent public sphere or a more anemic intellectual environment. Such claims are often as hopeful as they are retrospective, however, urging for continued or renewed experimental practices within the contemporary artistic field.[4]

Such confusions are far from uncommon in contemporary scholarship, where the nostalgic spirit of so-called revolutionary insurrection rehearses a truncated canon of authorized cultural agents—or, on the other hand, whose distance from our own contemporary sense of agency seems so irreconcilably vast as to render the possibility of radical art an alien pretense, or, in the very best of cases, a task to perform beyond the restrictive historical premises of "the avant-garde."[5] As poet Cathy Park Hong has written, "The avant-garde has become petrified, enamored by its own past, and therefore forever insular and forever looking backwards. Fuck the avant-garde. We must hew our own path."[6]

Such accounts point to the excesses against which the currency of avant-garde behavior is measurable today. To what extent, however, has Hong's abandonment of the avant-garde already served to reawaken critical attention to the terms, personnel, and ambitions of experimental art? It is precisely for their fundamental interrogation of—and even disgust for—the nostalgic petrification of the avant-garde that such gestures become fundamental to the suspension of certainties about the instrumentality of experimental art. Rather than presuming a fixed set of historical conditions for avant-garde activity—such as the institutional separation of art from life in bourgeois European society, for instance—the essays in this special issue feature the conditions of warfare within which both "art" and "life" are already thrown into violent disarray. Life—as well as art—during wartime is fragile, precarious, and as subject to self-protection as to subversion, suppression, or violent death. The stakes of experimentalism under such conditions are both intensified and mutifarious.[7]

The essays in "The Avant-Garde at War" examine the particular combinations of ideology, aesthetic form, and political change formulated and practiced by avant-garde movements during times of war. The aim here is twofold. First, in studying the tactics of avant-garde movements in times of violent geopolitical upheaval, the essays collected in this issue contribute to a renewed scholarly interest in avant-gardism as a persistent tendency in intellectual history, revising and surpassing its canonical limitation to the Belle Epoque and interwar Europe. The same logic that restricts avant-garde activity to the historical period between the two world wars also presumes the whiteness and Europeanness of such activity. By this logic, later formations that emerged after WWII become

"neo-avant-garde"—more contemporary, perhaps, but also unoriginal. In non-European regions of the world (as well as for cultural agents of non-European origins or ethnic backgrounds), this periodization imposes a notion of belatedness, a stigma of the colonial and postcolonial arts. The trivializing terms used to periodize even the Euro-American "neo" avant-garde have tended to proscribe both unoriginality and, in many cases, a limited political sensibility to the geopolitical reality of unfolding experimental work, whereby groups and tendencies such as the Black Arts Movement, the Black Panthers, Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop), the Latin American boom, and experimental feminism become secondary and marginal, "like hyenas feeding off the carcasses left behind by white writers," as John Yao puts it in a recent essay.[8] As Yao notes, such art-historical delimitations are analogous to the placement of art in major museums, where non-European works and movements tend to reside suspiciously near the coatroom. "The location," he writes, "is telling."[9] "The Avant-Garde at War" begins to redress this delimitation by interrogating the basic historical parameters of the avant-garde. The fact that radical aesthetic and political groups continue to develop throughout the world discloses the need for new histories (rather than overarching theories alone) of avant-gardism, as well as for new approaches to the thought and creative work of experimental movements themselves.

Second, by examining the fate of aesthetic and political radicalism in the midst of wartime, the issue offers new insights into the ideological confrontations, intellectual currents, and micropolitical strategies at work at such moments. Such confrontations are both world-historical and art-historical in nature, extending from responses to genocide and mobilization to the art-historical "exclusion, tokenism, and double standard used to judge poems by writers of color in the 'avant' world," as Dorothy Wang has written.[10]

Viewed across the demarcation lines of the world wars, our histories and taxonomies of the avant-garde remain necessarily incomplete. It may be virtually impossible to characterize the full extent of experimental movements and formations that continue to emerge around the world. Even so, the task of scholarship, and the project of the essays in this special issue, remains continually to rethink the terms and canons by which we judge radical art, as well as its political stakes and consequences. The six essays collected here offer a necessarily partial assessment of wartime avant-garde activity, the full extent of which may be unknowable, or knowable only retrospectively—precisely because the sphere of activity is literally global in scope. In proposing that "avant-garde" describes an expansive and even open set of formal and conceptual experiments, as

well as exigencies and emergencies, the historical terms of which inform the ideological and artistic work forged from within its midst, the essays here begin to disaggregate the "theory of the avant-garde" in favor of particularized assessments of the work done in situ.

The issue begins with Timothy Youker's "War and Peace and Ubu: Colonialism, the Exception, and Jarry's Legacy," which examines two contemporary sub-Saharan African plays based on Alfred Jarry's Ubu plays: Jane Taylor's and the Handspring Puppet Company's *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) and Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu* (2002). Consistent with Jarry's work, itself set during a period of French colonial expansion, these plays erase the distinction between reason and unreason, "civilization and savagery" (p. 543), instead presenting postcolonial politics as a set of practices that hinge on a choice between the "the state's . . . nonsense that masquerades as reason and the *authentic* nonsense of those whom the state oppresses" (p. 543). The two postindependence theatrical works featured in Youker's essay frame "politics as usual" (p. 534) as a necropolitics entailing the material destruction of human bodies and populations. Far from a case of influence or postcolonial belatedness, the dark humor of these contemporary plays is instead contemporaneous with the persistent European problem of expunging a figure such as Père Ubu, whose murderous unreason is all to easily disavowed by empowering political systems.

Effie Rentzou's "'Partout et Nulle Part': Apollinaire's Body after the War" studies Guillaume Apollinaire's artistic and ideological program in his posthumously published essay "Poets and the New Spirit" (1918), which was "inescapably overdetermined by the war" (p. 557). In spite of Apollinaire's expressions of nationalism toward his adopted French homeland and jingoistic support for the war, his approach to experimental art is particularly significant, Rentzou argues, for its somatic relation to ideology and aesthetics alike: the war gave "the new spirit" an exigency so urgent as to become corporeal. Far from simply the "fusion of life and art" (p. 558), the somatization of art and ideology became a totalizing experience that demanded the reinvention of subjectivity altogether, an experimentalism with corporeal and mortal results. Whereas we may remain skeptical of Apollinaire's political affiliations, Rentzou focuses less on their ideological content than on their intensity, whereby, in spite of all the triumphal rhetoric of vanguard experimentalism, we find the wounded body of the poet waiting to die.

In "From the Historical Avant-Garde to Highbrow Coterie Modernism: The *Little Review*'s Wartime Advances and Retreats," Christopher La Casse turns to the *Little Review*, a modernist American

"little magazine" (p. 581) that began as an anarchist periodical in 1914 and asserted its countercultural radicalism during the first half of WWI. La Casse traces how the journal's positions shifted in light of wartime events such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*, increasingly privileging aesthetics over revolutionary politics, a shift galvanized by Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war in 1917. La Casse's study documents the effects of the wartime "culture war" (p. 584) that conditioned the ideological as well as economic pressures on the journal, offering an important window into the way a medium for artistic dissemination shaped its editorial commitments.

The issue continues with two essays that address wartime writers whose work attends to the broader historical and political structures operating within the immediate geopolitical upheavals of war. Kristin Bergen's "'Dogs Bark': War, Narrative, and Historical Syncopation in Gertrude Stein's Late Work" turns to Gertrude Stein's increasingly scrutinized political commitments—or scandalous lack thereof—during the Spanish Civil War and the Vichy régime. Recent critics have interrogated the tendency for Stein's wartime writings to abstract war "from its real basis in violence and politics" (p. 613): How, with Nazi soldiers billeted in their home, could Stein write about cakes while Alice B. Toklas baked them? How could a Jewish writer ignore the Holocaust, and even undertake a translation of a Marshal Pétain speech? Bergen argues that Stein's writing does indeed address the political, though not in explicit representational or identitarian terms. War, Stein proposes, is the lived expression of a "composition" that precedes it; by this logic, war is itself already a representation (as well as the medium) "of a historical change that is chronologically and analytically prior" to it (p. 618)—a radical, decisive historical change registered in the very form of historical differentiation and struggle, of which warfare is the living expression. Whereas Bergen's argument focuses on the technical mastery of Stein's narration, her essay nonetheless points to the drama of composition at work in Stein's thinking. Stein, she argues, advocated the peaceful "penetration" of races and nations over sudden cataclysmic confrontations (including, presumably, fascism and genocide)—though her essay also dramatizes the concomitant abstraction of Stein's theories. Not only was *writing* not directly engaged in the active forces of historical change, war itself was not necessarily either, insofar as it constituted the representational expression rather than the form of historical change; the political, as Bergen suggests, instead demanded that one insinuate oneself within the work of composition or, rather, doggedly to insinuate difference within historicity itself, a project that only art could come close to achieving.

In a manner curiously analogous to Stein, US poet Muriel Rukeyser turned increasingly from a poetics of reportage and witnessing in her activist work of the 1920s and 1930s to a poetics of myth in which she sought to identify a "type of creation in which we may live and which will save us" (p. 558). In "'Atlantis Buried Outside': Muriel Rukeyser, Myth, and the Crises of War," Ben Hickman discusses this fundamental shift in Rukeyser's poetics during the Spanish Civil War and into WWII, whose recourse to a visionary mythopoeisis entailed an effort to imagine new, liberatory social possibilities, as well as to reclaim myth itself for proletarian and feminist purposes. The essay's fulcrum, we might say, is Rukeyser's acknowledgment in the poem "Mediterranean" that women are prevented from "going home into war" (p. 640), an acknowledgment of the mythos of warfare whose double effect is at once to foreclose the poet's testimonial access to wartime experience and to disclose the myth of warfare as a "home" (p. 640) for men of any nation. Fundamentally interrogating the gender politics and ideological repercussions of such "homes" and origins, Hickman's essay examines how Rukeyser's wartime poetry rethinks its own investment in documentary source material, instead taking up myth in order to rethink the very idea of source itself.

The issue concludes with Seth Perlow's "The Conceptualist War Machine: Agonism and the Avant-Garde," which studies the field of contemporary poetry in the United States. Perlow discusses recent works of contemporary poetry such as Kenneth Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013) alongside earlier works such as Charles Reznikoff's collage of transcriptions of the Nuremberg trials in his 1975 *Holocaust*. For Perlow, Goldsmith's 2013 reading of Michael Brown's autopsy report designates a paradox in the long history of the avant-garde: while championing the secondary nature of poetry as parasitical, useless, and fatigued, conceptualist writing nonetheless owes its claim to exigency to the persistence of the modern state as a war machine that continues to jockey for global position while militarizing its police force and, in the case of the contemporary United States in particular, engaging in a state of warfare with its own African American population. Perlow criticizes conceptualist writers such as Goldsmith for their recourse to war, genocide, and urban violence in spite of their methodological insistence that writing be as "uncreative" (p. 671) as dishwashing; the neutralization of historical violence and warfare is bound up instead in a concomitant agonism by which the animating violence in conceptual poetry is an aesthetic rather than political one.

Such accounts of the particular strategies and limitations of experimental art in times of war begin to articulate the reasons why avant-garde

art doesn't go away: this is not because we should heed every claim to novelty or historical rupture or champion the so-called successes of certain experimental authors and works, but because the very persistence of experimental and radical art corresponds—for better or worse—with the political reality of permanent warfare. Not all experimental art is inherently radical; as Stefania Heim writes, "[T]here are many reasons why poets [or other artists] deploy broken forms, leaps, disjunctions, irregular syntax, obfuscated meaning, improvisation, metonymy, and polymorphous subjectivities."[11] But to recognize the persistent wager of radical art movements and individuals on the possibilities of political art remains no less imperative, especially during wartime.

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NOTES

1. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31.
2. The term *avant-garde* as a name for *artistic* intervention within political activity seems to have been coined in 1825 by Henri de Saint-Simon, who, in his *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* [Literary, philosophical, and industrial opinions], claimed that artists would comprise the vanguard of the intellectual revolution (see Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011], 9). As James M. Harding argues, however, such etymological approaches do not necessarily answer the questions of historical agency or political and artistic effectiveness often levied upon the term, especially since the cultural phenomena to which we refer as "avant-garde" are never without precedent. "The avant-garde," Harding writes, "is always the avant-gardes, and while the constituting points of departure for one may borrow from another, one avant-garde is seldom directly contingent upon the precedents set by its predecessors. Vanguard traffic moves in pluralities" (*The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013], 4).
3. Moten, *In the Break*, 31.
4. In an essay for a special issue of *New Literary History* published in 2010, Walter L. Adamson proposes that it is precisely through their "deaths" that we can begin to understand avant-garde movements, yet this mortality also represents a condition of these movements' own self-understanding. The question of "what is an avant-garde?," whether voiced in the present or imperfect tense, is a question that radical artistic and intellectual groups have tended to ask themselves (see "How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin: Italian Futurism in Historical Perspective," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 [2010]: 855–74).
5. For work that realigns the possibilities of political art beyond its interwar historical limits, see Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

6. Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" (para. 8), *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion*, http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde.
7. As Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingröver write,

   > Avant-garde practice never did unleash a single event that brought definitive change and obviated the need for resistance; rather avant-garde resistance emerges through multiple events that continually redraw lines of power. As fluid, mobile, transformative, contradictory, unstable, unsettling, and even 'diabolical' as this practice must therefore be, it is the task of the critic to be just as mobile and contradictory, crossing genres and disciplines in pursuit of the work of the avant-garde.

   See Halle and Steingröver, eds., *After the Avant-Garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), 14.
8. John Yao, "'Purity' and the 'Avant-Garde,'" *Boston Review*, 29 April 2015, http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/john-yau-purity-avant-garde.
9. Ibid.
10. Dorothy Wang, "From Jim-Crow to 'Color-Blind' Poetics: Race and the So-Called Avant-Garde," *Boston Review*, 10 March 2015, http://bostonreview.net/poetry/dorothy-wang-race-poetic-avant-garde-response.
11. Stefania Heim, "Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," *Boston Review*, 10 March 2015, http://bostonreview.net/blog/boston-review-race-and-poetic-avant-garde.